

VIII. OPERATIONS ISSUES

INTRODUCTION

The major park issues facing Gorges State Park were identified by the Division of Parks and Recreation staff at the initiation of the general management plan process. The issues have been divided into three categories: natural resources (see Chapter VI), capital improvements (see Chapter VII) and operations. This chapter identifies park operations issues and makes recommendations for addressing them during the next five years.

Two operations issues for Gorges State Park that are of significant concern are the Auger Hole Road and the Horsepasture River.

AUGER HOLE ROAD

Background Information

The Auger Hole Road is an old gravel and dirt road starting from Frozen Creek Road outside of Rosman, in Transylvania County. The road traveled through the Duke Power properties, crossing Frozen Creek, Toxaway River, Bearwallow Creek, Horsepasture River and the Thompson River before terminating at the North Carolina/South Carolina state line. At this point the road is known as the Muster Ground Road, which terminates at the Bad Creek Project in South Carolina. Long before Gorges State Park was established, Duke Power opened the Auger Hole Road for general use. In the early 1980's it was closed due to misuse and overuse that resulted in road deterioration and environmental issues. Once it was closed, sportsmen were allowed to access Duke Power properties via the Grassy Ridge Road off of Hwy 281. During the late 70s through the late 90s Duke Power helped the Transylvania County Sheriffs Office fund a full-time deputy to patrol the area due to the misuse occurring on the property such as uncontrolled off road vehicle use, drinking, drug use, parties, camping, litter and vandalism.

Current Use

With the purchase of the Duke Power property and the establishment of the Toxaway Game Land and Gorges State Park in April 1999, the Auger Hole Road was reopened to limited traffic based on the following excerpt from then Secretary of DENR Wayne McDevitt's letter to Governor Hunt, dated May 26, 1998:

Access to the game lands will be provided to the hunters during the hunting season via the Auger Hole Road (also known as the Frozen Creek Road) or an alternative new or existing road mutually agreed upon by the Division of Parks and Recreation and the Wildlife Resources Commission. Hunters crossing the Gorges State Park will have their guns unloaded and cased. The road and appropriate river crossings will be maintained by both the Wildlife Resources Commission and the Division of Parks and Recreation.

Currently Gorges State Park is maintaining six miles of the Auger Hole Road and river crossings at Frozen Creek, Toxaway River and Bearwallow Creek with very little help from the Wildlife Resources Commission. A special keyed lock system (located at the Frozen Creek access) was created by park staff to honor the agreement to let hunters access the Toxaway Game Land and to help protect the environment. Over the past three years, numerous attempts have been made by the Division of Parks and Recreation to establish a formal agreement regarding operation and maintenance of the road between the Division and the Wildlife Resources Commission without any success. The Division has therefore been left with virtually all of the expense of maintaining and managing the road. Use of the road by hunters is light. Some people also come by the park office, show a valid hunting license and receive a key, and then use the access for non-hunting purposes such as camping, fishing and joy riding.

Issues

- The Division is incurring virtually the entire cost in money, materials and staff time to maintain the six miles of the Auger Hole road for the benefit of the Wildlife Resources Commission and hunters.
- Environmental concerns exist related to erosion from the roadbed, which traverses rocky and steep terrain and three river fords. These concerns would increase with increased use.
- Use of the road by hunters is a violation of park regulations – GS113-35, Title 15A, Chapter 12b, NCAC .0901(a): No person except authorized park employees, their agents, or contractors, or officers of the state shall carry or possess firearms, airguns, bows and arrows, sling shots, or lethal missiles of any kind within any park.
- Where the road crosses the Toxaway River and Bearwallow Creek, rains can make the waters swift, deep and dangerous. People face situations where they may try to cross the streams at times when conditions make doing so a danger. Although signs make people aware of the danger, a more stable, safer, and permanent solution or another access is needed.
- Other routes that access the Toxaway Game Land can be constructed without crossing the park.

Recommendations

It is recommended that the Division follow the recommendations of the Park Master Plan (2003), developed and adopted after extensive public input, which states:

Auger Hole Road is represented in this master plan as a gated, but open road for public use. Based on the current agreement, Auger Hole Road will remain open until a more suitable route to the game lands can be established.

A more appropriate permanent route to the game lands should be established. Until that time, the Division of Parks and Recreation should continue to attempt to secure a formal

use agreement with the Wildlife Resources Commission which includes specific shared cost and responsibilities of each agency. If such an agreement cannot be secured, the Division will only continue to operate the road as long as it is in a condition conducive to use and will only expend funds for its maintenance to the extent that such funds benefit the park's operation.

HORSEPASTURE RIVER

Background Information

Perhaps the most popular recreational attraction in the Gorges area is the Horsepasture River, which drops sharply off the Blue Ridge Escarpment and passes through rocky gorges and rugged terrain until it reaches Lake Jocassee. It has five major scenic waterfalls, Drift Falls, Turtleback Falls, Rainbow Falls, Stairstep Falls, and Windy Falls. The upper three falls – Drift, Turtleback and Rainbow - have traditionally been more easily accessible by short hikes from NC 281 over narrow and well-worn trails paralleling the river. Picnicking has been a popular activity on the rock outcroppings above and below the two upper falls, and these have also been popular sliding falls. The area has also been popular for fishing and camping.

In the mid 1980s, there was a proposal to build hydroelectric facilities on the river that would have diverted much of the flow from the river above Drift Falls and piped it to a power plant below Windy Falls. Public opposition mounted and support for protecting the river and its falls grew. The hydroelectric project was dropped and instead the river was studied and recommended for designation as a North Carolina *Natural and Scenic* river. In June of 1985, the NC General Assembly designated the segment of the Horsepasture downstream from Bohaynee Road (NC281) to Lake Jocassee as a *Natural* river. The designation Act called for development of a plan that would recognize and provide for protection of the river and its gorge "...so as to preserve its outstanding scenic character in perpetuity."

The Act also directed the Governor to seek inclusion of the river segment in the federal Wild and Scenic Rivers System. This was done successfully, and on October 27, 1986, Congress designated the approximately 4.25 mile segment as a federal *Wild and Scenic* river. At that time, part of the river corridor downstream of NC 281 was in US Forest Service ownership and part owned by Duke Power Company (now Duke Energy).

In the 1990s, public access to the river and falls was made more difficult as access from Bohaynee Road was curtailed by land ownership changes along the road and subsequent posting and enforcement of "no parking" and "no trespassing". Public protests arose over whether public trust rights to enjoy the river were being violated. The enforcement actions resulted in less public use of the river.

Current Use

After establishment of Gorges State Park and a nearby Gorges State Park access, public access and use of the river has increased. Visitors park their vehicles in Gorges State Park and then leave state park property to go onto US Forest Service (USFS) property to visit the river and falls. Approximately 120 acres of USFS property lies between the river and Gorges State Park. The USFS does not maintain the trails along the river nor do they staff and manage the property for public use. In effect, Division staff are called upon for search and rescue and other matters involving the Horsepasture River. As park facilities are developed and visitation increases, problems will only escalate.

Issues

- The Division does not own or control the most popular and scenic recreational resource in the Gorges area, one that is designated a NC *Natural and Scenic* river.
- The Division is the de facto manager of the USFS-owned segment of the Horsepasture River.
- The Horsepasture River environment is being damaged by poor trail maintenance and uncontrolled use. As Gorges State Park visitation increases, public use of the Horsepasture River will also increase.
- Public safety along the Horsepasture River and its waterfalls is a major concern. Better signs are needed.
- The Division has been directed by the General Assembly to protect the river and its gorge "... so as to preserve its outstanding scenic character in perpetuity", yet is not doing so.

Recommendations

The Division would like to see the Horsepasture River managed so as to allow the general public better access to the river and falls, to decrease emergency response time, to better protect the natural resources, and to improve visitor services. The Division should follow the master plan recommendation and seek to include this property as a part of the park. This could be done in the future by leasing the area from the USFS or by obtaining title to the property by trade or purchase. The Director and/or Superintendent of State Parks will contact and work with the USFS to address this issue.

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